

- We are in a teaching series that is focusing on OT characters.
- We are examining the lives of certain people from the OT history in order to see how they interacted with God, how they responded to him, what they did, what they said and thought.
- In doing so, we get a window into how we ourselves can and should respond to the activity of God in the world and in us.
- Today let's look at a very famous person from the OT, named Elijah. He was considered one of the greatest (if not the greatest) prophet in Israel's history.
- A little backstory. Elijah was a powerful prophet during the time of some pretty wicked kings in Israel, particularly a man named Ahab who had married a Phoenician queen who was worse than he was.
- Under their leadership, they had almost eliminated the worship of Yahweh from Israel and replaced it with worshippers of local cult gods and goddesses.
- This caused God to send a 3+ year drought on the land which Elijah got the privilege of telling the king about.
- Ahab and Jezebel blamed Elijah for the drought and he was persona non grata for several years. Finally, God told Elijah that the drought would be lifted, so Elijah got the king to gather all 400+ prophets of Baal, the local cult, along with as many Israelites as they could fit on a place called Mount Carmel. What followed was an epic contest, where each side made an altar and they each called on their god to burn up the sacrifice with fire from heaven to prove they were the real god.
- As we might expect, nothing happened with the prophets of Baal, but when Elijah prayed, fire came down from heaven, burnt up the offering, the stones, and even the water Elijah had soaked it all with. The people realized that God was God and Elijah had all the prophets of Baal put to death. That evening, the rain returned and the drought ended.
- Let's pick up the story here.

1 Kings 19:1 Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 2 So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them." 3 Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, 4 while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." 5 Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep.

- Have you ever been where Elijah was?
- You know, that time and place where you felt like you were discouraged. Disillusioned. In the valley?
- When we are in those places, it can affect our lives deeply. It affects us, our relationship with God and with other people.
- What are we to do when we enter the valley?
- Every single person has been in the valley, is in it now or some day will be.
- From this story I want to look at three things.
- What does it look like in the valley? How do you know when we are in it? What are the characteristics of the valley?
- How God deals with us in the valley?
- What is our response?
- Let me read the rest of the story, and then let's unpack it.

All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." 6 He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. 7 The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." 8 So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. 9 There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 10 He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." 11 The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. 12 After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. 13 When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 14 He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." 15 The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. 16 Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. 17 Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. 18 Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel – all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him."

- Valleys are normal, particularly after a high.
- We often would like life to be one continuous mountaintop after the next, at at the least, on some higher plateau. But the reality is that life has ups and downs.
- Elijah is exhausted. He has just had this amazing mountaintop experience (literally) and it has wiped him out. He is hungry. He is in a low place physically. He is actually suicidal.
- It is interesting that God meets Elijah's physical needs first.
- He sends an angel to feed him and tell him to sleep.
- It is really difficult to have a proper perspective on anything when we are in an exhausted, tired and needy state. This can be more than physical, but the physical is certainly a part of it.
- Once those issues are taken care of, Elijah travels all the way to Mount Horeb. It's other name is Mount Sanai. You might remember this as the place Moses encountered God in the burning bush. It's where God gave Moses and Israel the law. It's where he appeared in power and glory. That's where Elijah ended up. But he is still in the valley.

I. It's easy to lose perspective in the valley.

- I love this interaction between God and Elijah. Listen to Elijah's complaint.
9 There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 10 He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

A. Elijah had an inflated sense of himself.

- I am doing all the right things. God, I am trying hard. I am doing more than anyone else. I am living the right way. I am following the rules, following you. I am accomplishing stuff and yet it's not turning out.

- There is a prideful approach to God.
- You might say that this is not you. When you are in the valley, you don't elevate yourself.
- But pride is nothing more than a focus on self.
- On one hand, we wonder why are you doing this to me God? I don't deserve all this.
- Or the flip side . . . I am such a bad person, I deserve all of this.
- But in the valley, we focus almost exclusively on me.

B. Elijah compared.

- The others are the problem. They are not following you. They are not doing what they are supposed to be doing. They are not responding to me and my ministry the way they are supposed to be responding to my ministry. I just showed them who God was in an amazing way and they responded well for all of two seconds.
- Everyone else has it better than me. Why is my life not like theirs? Why doesn't anyone else care like I do? How come I'm the only one doing life right.
- When we are in the valley, we go to comparison so easily.

C. Elijah isolated himself.

- I'm the only one left. There is no one else.
- He had become irrationally fearful. Jezebel is trying to kill me. I am literally the only one in the nation who serves and loves you.
- Did you notice in the story that he intentionally left his companion behind when he went into the wilderness. It was probably his apprentice and he left him behind to be by himself.
- Our tendency in the valley is to isolate – this is never helpful.
- Elijah had lost perspective. In the valley, we don't see our circumstances appropriately. We focus on ourselves. We view others wrongly. We dismiss good news. We minimize victories and maximize problems. There is a complete loss of perspective.
- If we want to deal well with our time in the valley, we must begin to realize that our perspective might be a warped and twisted.
- This next sequence is really interesting to me.

11 The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. 12 After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. 13 When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

- God tells Elijah to pay attention and then he brings a hurricane force wind. Then he brings an earthquake. Then he brings fire. But we are told that God was not in any of these things.
- Then he whispered quietly to Elijah and Elijah was undone.
- Even more curious, God then asks Elijah the exact same question: "Why are you here?" and Elijah answers the exact same way. God then proceeds to direct Elijah.
- Why did he not just do this the first time? Why did he feel the need to bring the wind, earthquake and fire? What was he trying to do with Elijah?

II. God always looks to restore us to relationship.

A. God was adjusting Elijah's expectations of God.

- These three things are all symbols of God's judgment. They were physical phenomena associated or precursors to God's coming or presence frequently throughout history, especially on that particular mountain.
- Elijah had just had an experience where God had come in power to burn up the offering with fire from heaven. He had sent a storm to end the drought. It was powerful and amazing but the results were disappointing. He expected Israel to turn and serve God, but the people's recognition of God lasted about as long as it took for king Ahab to go home and tattle to the queen about him.
- What often triggers a valley experience is that our expectations of what we think should be are not met. Elijah expected God to do what he would do through power displays. He thought the primary means of reaching the people was the display of God's power in dramatic and spectacular ways.
- He expected God to work a certain way and it was not working out. God wanted to adjust his expectations. And so he paraded all his power and might in front of Elijah – things he was used to and expected. Yet he waited until the calm and then spoke.
- And suddenly in that still small voice, Elijah was completely undone in a way that the power demonstrations did not.
- What God was doing was letting Elijah know that:

B. God was putting Elijah's eyes back on God.

- After his display and quiet voice, he asked Elijah the same question as before.
- How do you imagine the tone of God's voice way to Elijah? Demanding? Gentle? Loaded with expectation? Sympathetic?
- Did it change from the first time to the second? Did Elijah's tone change?
- God asked questions, not because he wants information, but to teach Elijah something. "I know why you are here. Do YOU know why you are here?"
- Elijah, I do not just speak through the mountaintop experiences.
- A whisper is intimate – between friends.
- God needed Elijah to stand still. To listen. To be still and know he was God.
- In the midst of our valleys we need to trust less in what we see God doing and more in who God is.
- When Elijah pulls his cloak over his face in response to God's whisper, it is an act of worship. Of reverence.
- We often want another mountaintop experience to get out of our valley.
- But God is in the valley. He is speaking. In the midst of your valley, God is inviting you to himself. To worship. To put him first. To regain your perspective. To hear his voice. To know he cares deeply about you. You see frequently in this story how God cared for Elijah.
- Only after all this does he address Elijah's complaints.
- Elijah is not reprimanded for his complaint nor complimented for his zeal, nor comforted about his precarious circumstances.
- What does is is affirm his presence and his relationship and then:

III. God reappointed him to service and purpose.

15 The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. 16 Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. 17 Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. 18 Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel – all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him."

- Elijah, your job is not done. I chose you as my prophet. I have used you. You need to continue. I still have a purpose for you. I am still planning on using you.
- I have tasks for you to accomplish.
- These tasks are quite crazy, by the way. He was supposed to anoint king a foreign power (who would end up attacking and doing incalculable damage to Israel) and then start a revolution and train his successor.
- We don't stay there. Keep moving. Keep your eyes focused on the bigger picture, not on yourself.
- The temptation to check out and run away from God and from others in the midst of our valley is a huge one.
- God has a purpose for each of you. Your past experiences do not disqualify you from service. Nor does your past service for him let you sit back and do nothing because you've done all that stuff before.
- Listen to his voice. Worship him. Seek him. Let him direct where he wants to use you for service and purpose.
- And I love God's last words. Oh yeah, by the way, you are not alone. There are many who serve me. You are one of them. You are not alone.

- Valleys are inevitable.
- Your life will not be a long set of mountaintop experiences. Most of the time you will be descending into one of these times or climbing out of one.
- But it is not bad news.
- What valley are you in?
- Where have you been recently?
- It could be a work valley, a financial valley, a relational valley, a health valley.
- So when you begin to lose perspective, take a pause.
- Consider where you might be focusing on yourself to the exclusion of all else.
- Notice where you are comparing yourself to others.
- If you feel like isolating yourself, fight this impulse.
- God is inviting you to regain a sense of him.
- Worship. Spend time with him.
- Let him give you a renewed sense of purpose and mission.
- David was a man familiar with valleys.
- He faced Goliath in a valley
- He fled from Saul and spent time in valleys
- He ran from a son who wanted to kill him in a valley
- He did battle in valleys
- He suffered in the valley of his sin when he committed adultery and murder.
- Yet he wrote the most well known Psalm of all time.

Psalm 23

1 The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,

3 he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.

4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

6 Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.